



NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE



402496

Chairman

JONATHAN S. LINEN

Senior Vice Chairman

CHARLES M. COLLINS

Vice Chairmen

REGINALD K. BRACK, JR.

KENNETH D. LEWIS

Secretary

MARTHA M. MITCHELL

Treasurer

WILLIAM M. LEWIS, JR.

President & CEO

HUGH B. PRICE

Board of Trustees

MICHAEL B. ALEXANDER

SHAWN M. BARNEY

STEPHANIE BELL-ROSE

DONALD F. BOUDREAU

LELAND C. BRENDSEL

WILLARD W. BRITTAIN

GLENN M. BROOKS

ALMA ARRINGTON BROWN

THELMA SCOTT BRUNSON

RONALD W. BURKLE

PHILIP J. CARROLL

LEONARD S. COLEMAN, JR.

MICHAEL J. CRITELLI

CAL DARDEN

EDWARD F. DEGRAAN

DANIELLE V. EADDY, ESQ.

PATRICK A. EWING

ELINOR J. FERDON

SAMUEL GRESHAM, JR.

JOSEPH S. HELEWICZ

BONNIE GUITON HILL

KEVIN E. HOOKS

ELEANOR V. HORNE

MAE C. JEMISON, M.D.

C. ROBERT KIDDER

JIM KING

RICHARD LOVETT

ARTHUR C. MARTINEZ

CAROL A. MASON

WILLIAM G. MAYS

THOMAS E. MCKINNON

JAMES E. OESTERREICHER

JONATHAN OGDEN

REV. DR. W. FRANKLYN RICHARDSON

DIANE STEVENS ROBINSON

GERALD S. ROBINSON

IVAN SEIDENBERG

CANDACE N. SMITH

BILL STEPHNEY

LOUISA STRAYHORN

PAUL TAGLIABUE

ROBERT D. TAYLOR

ISRAEL TRIBBLE, JR., Ed.D.

CAROLYN L. WRIGHT-LEWIS

Honorary Trustees

M. ANTHONY BURNS

COY G. EKLUND

DAVID T. KEARNS

THEODORE W. KHEEL

ROBERT C. LARSON

October 13, 1999

President William J. Clinton
 The White House
 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
 Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Clinton:

It was good to see you at the National Education Summit. Your speech was extraordinarily moving and smack on target. Thanks so very much for the warm acknowledgment, which I've proudly shared with leaders of our Urban League movement.

As you may know from subsequent briefings, the Summit was both thought provoking and constructive. It moved the dialogue about achievement beyond a focus on higher standards per se, to a much-needed discussion of how to help youngsters meet those standards.

At the Summit, I presented some ideas about how to hoist the achievement levels of urban children by concentrating henceforth on creating successful schools instead of attempting to reform school systems. In essence, I said it was time to:

1. Assert no-nonsense state leadership and responsibility;
2. "Charterize" all urban schools;
3. Professionalize the teaching profession; and
4. Transform the role of school superintendents from operations to accreditation.

Enclosed is a National Urban League position paper that presents these points in greater detail, beginning on page 6. In the paper, I also call for real-world academic standards and challenge the wisdom of school vouchers.

President William J. Clinton
October 13, 1999
Page Two

In calling for aggressive state leadership, I by no means intend to minimize the critically important role of the federal government in stimulating and financing the change that must occur. In fact, the current debate over the disposition of the federal budget surplus provides an historic opportunity for your administration to move the ball way downfield for youngsters who've been left behind. I trust you will continue to challenge Congress to seize this opportunity – and not squander it.

I hope that the enclosed position paper is helpful to you and members of your administration as you consider the most appropriate federal, state and local strategies for raising the achievement levels of urban children. Thank you for your consideration – and your leadership.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Hugh B. Price".

Hugh B. Price
President

**Hugh B. Price
President
National Urban League
October 12, 1999**

**The Aim of Urban School Reform:
Successful Schools, Not "Systemic" Reform**

The saga of public education played out on both sides of the Hudson River the other day. At the IBM Conference in the Palisades, the nation's self-proclaimed education governors and corporate leaders convened to take stock of the education accountability movement and map plans for improving the caliber of public schools.

Given the recent obsession of politicians and policymakers with ending social promotion and imposing tough standards, the dialogue at IBM was refreshingly candid and constructive. The joint declaration issued to close the conference focused, finally, on what it will take to boost achievement and hoist children over the higher bars for graduation.

Yet to the East, the City of Yonkers was roiled by a rancorous school strike. At issue was a instructionally-sound proposal by the new Superintendent to devote more classroom time per day to fewer core subjects. The local Federation of Teachers cried foul; the school board called their bluff; and the union walk-out was on. So the grown-ups in charge of the school district made a sorry mess of a solid idea that principals and teachers probably could have sorted out rather easily in their respective schools.

Even so, these developments on either side of the Palisades represent progress. Until then, tough love was about the only remedy for low achievement that impatient politicians and anxious school administrators could come up with. End social promotion, they proclaimed. Send the laggards to summer school and hold them back if they still cannot cut it academically.

These tough love measures, increasingly in vogue across the country, are too timid structurally and off target pedagogically. Ending social promotion alone won't educate all youngsters to their fullest potential. America's most vulnerable children – in low-income urban and rural communities – will bear the brunt of this educationally bankrupt policy because, as things stand now, they'll be left behind by the millions.

Thus for the sake of public education and, above all, for the sake of the children, what's urgently needed is a radical reform that structures public education so that its sole *raison d'être* is student success.

Successful schools produce successful pupils. Not a smattering superstars per building, mind you, but the bulk of the student body. After a generation of research and experimentation, examples abound of urban and rural schools that serve low-income youngsters quite admirably, with some even outperforming their more affluent suburban counterparts.

Research by Linda Darling-Hammond and others demonstrates that urban minority children can achieve roughly on par with more affluent students — provided the quality of education they receive is of comparable quality.

Yet try as big-city school boards and administrators might, few if any urban districts can honestly claim that they educate the vast majority of kids remotely up to their potential. Pick a report card — *Education Week's* annual *Quality Counts* volume or any other objective measure — and the best that a mere handful of urban districts can claim is modest increases in test scores. The pace and scope of progress is unacceptable and the reform prescriptions in vogue these days are too feeble for the task ahead.

Real-World Standards

Since the education standards movement is driving school reform these days, let's start there. The rush to impose rigorous standards begs the question of where they should be pegged. It was startling to hear several governors at the National Education Summit confess that in their haste to get tough, their states probably had given less thought than they should have to the actual content of the standards.

In my view, the standards students are expected to meet should be pegged to the proficiencies that real people need to succeed in the real world. They shouldn't be mirror images of the admissions standards for selective universities.

It isn't anti-intellectual to acknowledge the reality that most Americans never obtain college degrees. By their late 20s, nearly two-thirds still lack BA or AA degrees. One third never even start college. What's the point of placing the bar for graduation so high that it denies high school diplomas to conscientious youngsters who nevertheless aren't college bound? Why write off future truck drivers, deliverymen, short order cooks, chefs, train conductors, newsstand operators, construction workers and artisans as unworthy of diplomas?

Kate Maloy of the University of Pittsburgh puts it best:

"The purpose of every school, whatever its setting or resources, is to educate children for what lies ahead of them —further education for some, jobs for most, citizenship, somewhere, for all."

That is why the standards imposed by states should not be designed by academicians alone. States and school districts should assign this chore to a task force of thoughtful representatives of such sectors as business (big and small), organized labor, higher education and community organizations.

Among their many challenges, the drafters must wrestle with the contentious issue of deciding exactly what knowledge and skills should be assessed. For instance, why ask students to recite minutia and display skills that most mortals will never use as adults – or that easily can be discovered using modern technology? In other words, need we require that students recite the capitals of Texas and Utah, much less East Timor?

As I reflect on my own professional career and life experience, it strikes me that six clusters of competence are critically important. I hasten to add that these insights aren't novel. In my judgment, the following proficiencies are relevant regardless of one's station in life.

- Literacy – workable command of reading, writing and speaking in English
- Mathematics – command of the basic computational skills required in the workplace and everyday adult life
- Reasoning and critical thinking – capacity to ferret out information, find answers and solve problems
- Science – appreciation of the nature and uncertainties of the scientific inquiry
- Citizenship – understanding of the primary historical, cultural, demographic, political and economic forces and values that have shaped this country. Appreciation of America's relationship to the rest of the world, as well as the major forces shaping the other hemispheres.
- Technological literacy

This educational platform should be placed beneath every youngster. Beyond these basic proficiencies, the remaining courses that students choose should be shaped by their aspirations and ability. Those headed straight for the

labor force may opt to specialize in certain workplace skills suited to their interests, while college-bound students could elect more advanced academic courses that equip them for higher education.

Unless and until the public schools demonstrate convincingly that they instill these proficiencies in the vast majority of students, all other subjects that consume class time should be deemed secondary and jettisoned if need be.

The Folly of Vouchers

Low-income and minority parents who are fed up with lousy public schools find vouchers increasingly alluring. Their impatience is perfectly understandable. Parents cannot be faulted for seeking the best for their children.

Nevertheless, vouchers and their first cousin, education savings accounts, serve so few students that they're less an option for kids than a prod for public schools – at least at this juncture.

According to Kim Metcalf and Polly Tait, who co-authored a recent article on vouchers in *Phi Delta Kappan*, there's no question that parents of youngsters receiving vouchers are pleased to have a choice of public or nonpublic schools. In effect, vouchers subsidize the escape of motivated parents from the public schools.

Even so, vouchers do not necessarily improve the academic achievement of children who use them. The evidence on this critically important point is mixed. It is unclear that pupils with vouchers perform better than they would have had they remained in public school.

Equally troubling, non-public schools enjoy decisive advantages over public schools. By law, public schools must admit all comers. Non-public schools can be choosy. Public schools are severely constrained in meting out discipline; non-public schools are considerably less restrained. Public schools cannot suspend or expel with impunity; non-public schools can.

Above all, given the fact that concern over achievement provides the main impetus for vouchers, public schools must report their results; non-public schools do not.

How ironic, then, that in name of education accountability, vouchers and education savings accounts would shift precious public resources to non-public schools that are completely unaccountable to taxpayers for their academic results. Advocates of vouchers argue that competition is healthy for public schools. But the rules of competition are rigged against them. So trumpeting vouchers as the answer to what ails public education is both dangerous and specious.

The Goal: Successful Schools, Not "Systemic" Reform

Declaring that vouchers are unfair isn't tantamount to saying that the performance of urban public schools is satisfactory. The paramount issue facing educators and policymakers is how to boost the academic performance of urban youngsters, especially minority children who chronically lag behind, without dismantling public education in the process.

All of the ferment, the pressure and the reforms focused on urban education are starting to pay off. Some school districts report encouraging gains in reading and math scores. This is important because it helps restore public confidence in urban schools.

But let's be clear. Modest gains in test scores help politically. But inching ahead won't prepare our children adequately for the unforgiving world that awaits them after graduation from high school.

After a generation of urban school reform, it can be said with certainty that there are hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of high performing schools serving poor and minority youngsters all across the country. This spring the Education Trust, a highly respected research and advocacy organization, released a revealing survey of several hundred high performing schools around the country that serve minority and low income children. Many of them even outshine suburban schools on state tests.

These stellar schools share certain attributes, among them:

- These schools use high academic standards to design their courses, assess their students and evaluate their teachers;
- They devote lots more time than the typical school to reading and math instruction, even if that means lengthening the school day;
- They invest heavily in professional development so that their faculty stay on top of their game and focus on teaching methods that help their students meet tough academic standards;
- These highly successful schools monitor their students closely and intervene quickly if they falter. They don't dawdle during the school year and then impose massive doses of summer school after the students fall way behind;
- They get parents involved, not just with staging bake sales but with helping their children to do better in school and meet the standards; and

- They place the onus for improvement mainly on the educators, where it belongs.

The evidence is clear that principals and teachers know how to create schools that enable low-income and minority youngsters to achieve at very high levels. In other words, educators know how to create successful urban schools. But no one has figured out how to create successful urban school systems.

So it is time to stop trying to reform public school "systems." I say we concentrate instead on creating successful public schools throughout the system.

According to the legendary educator Anthony Alvarado, the sole focus of the educational enterprise should be student learning. Everything else, he argues, is "details." "A typical educational system is so top-heavy with details that learning can suffocate under the tonnage."

The thrust of federal, state and local education policy from this day forward should be to remove the tonnage so that educators can practice their profession and children can realize their academic potential. And so that both meet the legitimate expectation of society that students graduate with certain critically important proficiencies that equip them for self-reliance and citizenship.

Here then is the National Urban League's reform agenda aimed at transforming all urban schools into high performing schools:

1. Assert no-nonsense state leadership – and responsibility

Conventional wisdom holds that public education is a local responsibility. But the reality is that the quality of school graduates is a compelling societal concern that justifies aggressive leadership by states and by the federal government.

In the agricultural era, youngsters tended to live where they were reared. But contemporary children often grow up in one town, only to live and work elsewhere. Employers and society at large have the overriding stake in the caliber of education delivered by every school. America's very civility and competitiveness depend on it.

In recent years, states have stepped up to the plate to impose loftier standards and high stakes tests. Having set the bar, states now bear the primary moral, financial and, I'm convinced, legal responsibility for seeing to it that all children have a fair chance to clear it.

No longer should poor and minority children be held hostage to communities with low tax bases, weak commitments to quality education, and skinflint taxpayers who oppose providing adequate support for local schools. No

longer should the children be crippled by school districts riddled with unqualified teachers, insufficient books and antiquated schools. Having imposed high standards on all children, the states must step in and guarantee high quality education for every child.

2. "Charterize" all urban schools

Urban schools should be liberated from the stifling central school district bureaucracy and given the latitude to operate the way independent secular schools do. Under the scenario I propose, each school would be overseen by a governing board comprised, say, of local business and community leaders, educators and alumni who view student success as its paramount mission. The boards should be self-perpetuating so that they are spared the potential turmoil and unpredictability of elections.

Each school would be run by a principal, or headmaster, hired by the board. The principal would serve at the pleasure of the board, subject to due process. The principal in turn would assemble the faculty, who would serve at the pleasure of the principal and board, subject again to due process.

The local school district superintendent would grant each school a revocable contract – or charter – to operate for ten to fifteen years. The school would be accountable for seeing that, say, 75 percent of its students meet the state's real-world proficiency standards.

If the school meets this standard, it retains its charter, which can be renewed. If the pass rate falls below this threshold, the school would be placed on a watch list and required to come up with an improvement plan.

If after a reasonable period it fails to boost its performance, then the charter can be revoked. In effect, this means that the governing board and faculty responsible for operating the educational enterprise in that building can be dismissed and replaced with a new team. If need be, the facility itself can be shuttered temporarily or even permanently.

Given the public nature of the school, pupils should be chosen via a mix of self-selection (application) and lottery. This will prevent the creation of what are perceived as "loser" schools that are filled with students who weren't chosen by some other school.

The state would allocate an annual amount to each school based on its enrollment. The allocation formula should be sufficiently generous to guarantee small classes, modern facilities and equipment, sufficient supplies, and abundant high quality professional development.

The state education agency can negotiate purchase agreements with vendors of textbooks, food and supplies so that individual schools get an advantageous price. The states would also assume responsibility for ensuring that individual schools are properly sized and furnished. And for guaranteeing that there is no disparity – in resources, teacher quality or physical plant – between urban, suburban and rural communities.

Once each school's allocation is set, the actual utilization should be left entirely to the board and professional staff of each school. In other words, schools should be accountable for how many students they graduate, not for how many gallons of paint they purchase.

3. Professionalize the teaching profession

Given the projected shortage of principals and teachers, plus the need to increase teacher quality in urban and rural schools serving low-income children, the compensation offered education must be improved dramatically in order to create a strong demand for these jobs.

This can be done by increasing salaries to levels comparable with other professions and by offering attractive inducements like generous student loan write-offs for graduates who enter the profession. Why not offer young people with masters' degrees the same initial salaries as young MBAs, attorneys and engineers? Since most urban and rural districts are strapped financially, the federal and state governments should take the lead in financing the economic incentives needed to attract stronger educators to these school districts.

These special incentives should only be available to educators with masters' degrees who are certified by the state and who sign up to teach for at least five-to-ten years in low-income communities. If they leave the profession early, the loan relief would cease.

The critically important quid pro quo for paying educators like real professionals is that they in turn must relinquish those contract-based protections that other professionals do not enjoy. I speak of tenure, seniority, overtime, guaranteed class size, length of class periods and other provisions that severely impede the ability of principals to run their schools in the best of children.

If governors and state legislators truly believe their assertion that states are the engines of school improvement these days, they should muster the political courage to grant individual school boards and principals the discretion they need to run their schools.

Unions should be allowed to bargain district-wide, indeed state-wide, over salaries and fringe benefits. But, subject to appropriate oversight by their boards, principals should make all personnel decisions, such as whom to hire and for

how long, as well as the standards for measuring staff performance and the consequences if they fall short.

It isn't realistic politically to expect school districts to redefine the scope of union agreements this radically. So it's up to governors and state legislators who profess to care about children to override existing agreements and impose these conditions.

4. *The 21st century superintendent – accreditation, not operation*

Local school boards and central administrators operate their school systems today. As such they represent a major source of the "tonnage" that cripples the schools.

Rare is the school board – elected or appointed – that would be considered an asset to the educational process from the perspective of poor and minority children. Superintendents come and go so quickly that they seldom leave a lasting mark, much less a favorable one. Just below the surface, the central school bureaucracies rule – and stultify.

So what is the solution? The oversight of public schools needs to be professionalized and depoliticized. To cite Anthony Alvarado again, his experience indicates that urban youngsters can learn at high levels. But, as he cautions, "It takes time, continuity, concentration of focus."

Revolving door school superintendents, ongoing rhetorical battles between mayors and superintendents, mayoral use of fiscal support to hold school boards hostage – all contribute chaos and confusion, instead of continuity and concentration, to the educational enterprise. Our children and our community are the victims.

The role of the local school superintendent should be converted from operations to accreditation. In other words, the school superintendent should be responsible for awarding – and revoking – the charters and reporting to the public on whether the individual schools meet their targets.

If they do, the superintendent can extend the charter. If they fall short, the superintendent can monitor the school's remediation plan, revoke the charter if need be, and award it to a new educational team.

Given the state's dominant role in ensuring education quality, the local school superintendents should be appointed by and ultimately accountable to the state education agency. The superintendent in turn can be assisted by a local board of advisors, chosen by the superintendent and drawn from such sectors as parents, business, organized labor, the religious community, higher education and community organizations.

The National Urban League's school reform agenda is premised on what we know can work – individual public schools that are given the wherewithal and room to succeed. Our agenda parts company with the failed efforts to reform urban school systems.

When the clock strikes midnight this New Year's Eve, the policymakers, administrators, educators and unions that share responsibility for public schools had better leave all those excuses – and all that bureaucratic tonnage – in the litter baskets along with the noisemakers.

It will be a new millennium for humankind. If urban public education is to survive in the 21st century, it'd better be a new day for urban children.